

Abert's Squirrel

SCIENTIFIC NAME: The Abert's squirrel, *Sciurus aberti*, is named after Col. John Abert, the head of the U.S. Army Topographic Engineers in charge of mapping the western United States in the 1850s.

DESCRIPTION: The Abert's is a tassel-eared squirrel, so named due to the tassels of hair that extend past the tips of its ears. These tassels are obvious in fall, winter and spring but are not present during summer. Adult squirrels are large, weighing 16 to 30 ounces. A dark gray squirrel with white underparts and a narrow black stripe between front and hind legs separating these colors, the Abert's has a large, bushy gray tail with a white fringe and a prominent white eye-ring. A rusty or chestnut-colored stripe of varying width and length is present on the back. Male and female squirrels are similarly marked with no obvious difference in pelage.

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DISTRIBUTION: The Abert's squirrel commonly is found in ponderosa pine forests throughout central Arizona, from Prescott along the Mogollon Rim and into the White Mountains. Past transplants have moved this animal into mountain ranges where it was not known to occur previously, such as the Pinal, Graham and Catalina mountains.

HABITAT: This squirrel is associated with ponderosa pine forests between the elevations of 5,500 and 9,500 feet. Ideal squirrel habitat is composed of stands of ponderosa pines of different ages. Tall, 100-foot ponderosas provide a large number of pine cones, while shorter 50-foot trees provide cover and nest-building sites. Good squirrel habitat contains a large area of trees with interlocking crowns.

BIOLOGY: Breeding occurs in mid-May, with two to four young born after a 40-day gestation period. These young are born in a nest where they stay for seven to nine weeks before emerging. Young squirrels use the nest area for approximately three more weeks before being weaned, then disperse into surrounding habitat.

In high-quality habitat, Abert's squirrel population sizes are determined more by the severity of the previous winter than by any other factor. There is a strong correlation between the number of days of wintertime snow cover and the overall squirrel population size the following spring. Squirrel mortality increases when snow-cover depths of 1 to 4 inches persist for more than 60 days. Snow denies access to higher-quality food sources found on the forest floor, forcing squirrels to feed on the inner bark of ponderosa pines. Squirrels that feed on only inner bark slowly starve; if no other food is available, they lose weight and die.



STATUS: The Abert's squirrel is a popular small game animal in Arizona. Each year, hunters harvest about 30,000 Abert's squirrels.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: The Abert's squirrel depends entirely on ponderosa pine trees. As these pine trees are of great economic value, it is important that Abert's squirrel habitat needs are considered when planning and conducting timber sales and harvests. In recent years, large-scale fires and drought-related mortality have impacted ponderosa pine habitats. 🦨

■ Ron Day is a biologist who specializes in the management of small game, furbearers and predators.